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### Book review

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**Giandomenico Boffi and Marijan Sunjic (eds.)**

***Science and Christian Faith in Post-Cold War Europe: A comparative analysis 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall***

Vatican City: Lateran University Press, 2015. 146 pp. pb. €15.00. ISBN 978-88-465-1045-7

As readers of this journal will be well aware, the twenty-first century has seen a steady broadening-out of the dialogue between science and religion. There is a recognition that ‘religion’ is best understood not in monolithic terms, but as a richly-varied phenomenon; and, similarly, there has been an acknowledgment that ‘science’ encompasses a range of approaches to the natural world which may embrace considerable divergences in practice. Additionally, the particular local context in which the dialogue of science and religion is conducted may contribute its own nuances to the form and content of that dialogue.

The book under review is to be welcomed for its opening up of a particular context in which the science-religion dialogue has been taking place in recent decades: the European countries of the former Soviet bloc, in the wake of the collapse of communism. The papers it contains have their origin in a workshop which took place in Rome in 2014, bringing together participants from Croatia, Romania, Poland, Russia and Italy. The contributors are all academics, representing different disciplines. Whilst there are similarities in many of the stories told here (the withdrawal of religious freedoms and the state-sponsored promotion of a doctrinaire scientism during the Soviet era, for example), even in these geographically- and historically-constrained contexts considerable differences also arise.

After a scene-setting introduction by Marijan Sunjic, three papers relate to the situation in Croatia. Stipe Kutleša paints a bleak picture of that country in communist times, and a scarcely better one of the period since, noting the persistence of the view of science as supporting Marxist ideology and therefore necessarily opposing religion as ‘the opium of the

people' (28). Despite this, Dalibor Renić notes that according to a 2011 census, the population of Croatia is 84.28% Catholic and just 3.81% atheist. The overall message of these papers, however, is that neither official state institutions nor the Catholic Church currently offer platforms for the constructive engagement of science and religion in Croatia. A fascinating alternative perspective, that of the Orthodox Church in Croatia (4.44% of the population, according to Renić), is given by Petar Tomev Mitrikeski, who maintains that any antagonistic understanding of science and religion is essentially a Western one, with its roots in scholasticism.

In Romania the situation is different, the proportions of Orthodox to Catholic believers being the reverse of those in Croatia. Magda Stavinschi believes the conditions there to be favourable for dialogue between Orthodoxy and science, and notes the way in which organizations dedicated to pursuing that dialogue have been established over the last decade or so.

Teresa Obolevitch's paper on the situation in Poland presents another very different situation. Here the Catholic Church retained a social presence denied to it in Croatia, so that although it had to contend with restrictions on its freedom and state-sponsored atheist propaganda, the perception of a conflict between science and religion did not take so firm a hold. As a result, the post-cold war situation has seen science and religion in a lively engagement. Well-known scholars such as Michael Heller have also had an important role to play. Obolevitch observes that in Poland surveys have demonstrated that the belief that science and religion are in conflict is held principally by those coming from a scientific perspective, the attitudes of religious believers being rather more irenic.

In the Russian context, Alexei Bodrov notes that 'During the Soviet period no serious dialogue with religion was possible' (101), due not least to the exclusion of theology from the universities. With the demise of that era, however, there are now 'about 50 theological

departments and chairs at state and private universities and approximately the same number of religious studies departments' (103). Although levels of theological literacy in the country remain generally low, the possibility for serious engagement between science and theology is now being pursued, not least through conferences and publications.

The five short concluding papers are all from Italian contributors. They describe the work of SEFIR ('Scienza e fede sull'interpretazione del reale', 'Science and faith in the interpretation of reality'), the sponsors of the conference giving rise to this book (Giandomenico Boffi): note the changing political scene in Italy in the post-cold war era, with the eclipsing of both the Christian Democratic and Communist parties (Piero Benvenuti): present some comments on secularisation theory (Stefano Crespi Reghizzi) and on evolution (Fiorenzo Facchini); and offer a perspective on science-and-religion from the Italian Waldensian Church (Giovanni Pistone).

Collectively, these papers offer some fascinating insights into the development of the dialogue of science and religion in contexts very different to those in which it has been most vigorously pursued to date. Several contributors note the important support which has been offered by the John Templeton Foundation to the pursuit of these aims, through the sponsorship of networks, conferences, and publications. It is to be hoped that the shoots being nurtured here will continue to grow, thereby supporting fresh perspectives that can be offered to the wider science-and-religion community.

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